

The Call to be Faithful

The Reverend Ross Royden
October 31, 2017

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Preface

This booklet contains the lightly edited transcripts of three sets of talks that I have delivered this year for ‘Minutes that Matter’ on RTHK Radio 4. The format of the programme explains the form and length of the talks! Originally, a piece of music accompanied each of the talks, but I have left the details of the music out of the transcripts. Those who would like to listen to the audio version of the talks together with the music that originally went with them can still do so on the RTHK website in the Radio 4 Programme Archive.

The talks were written with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in mind.

In the first set of talks for March, I address directly issues arising from the Reformation and the division it caused. I argue that while the Reformation emphasized important aspects of the Christian Gospel, it had ‘unintended consequences’ apart from the immediate divisions it caused. The Church is facing the full force of these consequences today.

In the second set for August, the subject is the Holy Trinity. In the talks, I discuss the importance and centrality of the Holy Trinity for the Christian faith and argue against attempts in the present day to see belief in the Holy Trinity as something peripheral, optional, or even to be abandoned altogether. I urge those who continue to believe in the Holy Trinity to lay aside their historical differences and unite in the face of attacks on the historic, orthodox faith of the Church.

Finally, in the third set of talks for November, I examine what it means for the Church to be ‘fruitful’ as Jesus commanded. I argue that the Church in the West, taken as a whole, has ceased to be ‘fruitful’, and has instead opened itself, both consciously and unconsciously, to the prevailing spirit in western society with fatal results. I express the hope that Churches outside the West will take up the challenge to be faithful to Christ and stand firm against the new paganism that, I believe, is threatening the Church.

The title for the combined sets of talks comes from the words of our Lord in Revelation:

‘Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.’ (Revelation 2:10)

Ross Royden
All Saints’ Eve, 2017

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1. March, 2017 – The Reformation

Talk One: Setting the Scene

Certain dates come to be seen as having symbolic significance; not only are they the occasion of an important event, the event seems to represent something important and bigger than the event itself. The Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump, for example, are widely being seen as marking a significant change in attitudes in their respective countries.

On October 31, 1517 in Wittenberg, a relatively obscure town in Germany, a monk who lectured in the University ‘nailed’ 95 theses in Latin to the church door inviting people to debate them with him. At least, this is how the story came to be told. Scholars, in fact, are not sure whether he nailed them, posted them, or just had them printed. In whatever way the monk issued them, they were to have seismic consequences.

The monk was Martin Luther. The theses themselves were in many ways innocuous. The cause of them was a Papal Fundraising Scheme. The Pope wanted to build a magnificent Cathedral in Rome. To pay for it, he issued indulgences, which were sold throughout Europe. These indulgences granted the purchaser the power to get a loved one out of purgatory. They were understandably very popular.

Luther, however, was opposed to them and his theses challenged their sale. His protest went viral as one would say today. And it was not long before the argument became about much more than ‘indulgences’. Implicit in his opposition was a challenge to the authority of the Pope. Western Christianity, which had been united around the authority of the Pope, disintegrated and the Church became extremely fragmented. Many more joined the protest and it spread to other countries. The word ‘protestant’ came into being.

However, while the Protestants could agree on what they were against, they found it much harder to agree on what they were for. And rather than there being one protestant Church, many different Churches came into existence sometimes hating each other as much as they hated the Church of Rome.

In England, things were even more complicated. Initially, the King, Henry VIII, opposed the protestant movement earning himself the title of Defender of the Faith, that is, the Roman Catholic version of the faith. However, Henry then decided he wanted a divorce and the Pope for political rather than religious reasons refused. Thus was set in motion the English Reformation and the creation of the Church of England and, eventually, the world-wide Anglican Church, the Church to which I belong here in Hong Kong. I find it highly ironic that I am here today because the King of England wanted to marry his mistress.

I realize that this is a very general and all too simple summary of what by any account was anything but simple, but, I think, it is accurate enough. What is beyond dispute is that as a result of the Protestant Reformation division between Christians became the norm and the different Christian protestant groups formed their own denominations: Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, and so on. Having got a taste for division there was to be no stopping Christians, and since the Reformation many different denominations have come into existence.

I dwell on this today because this year is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Many events are being organized to commemorate it. We are certainly going to hear a lot more about it in the weeks and months ahead. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed to his Father that those who were to believe in him after his death would be one even as he and the Father were one (John 17). People continue to believe in Jesus and the Church is still here, but it remains deeply divided and fragmented.

The reality is that structural unity between Christians is not going to happen any time soon, although, ironically, some of the closest friendships I personally have are with people from different denominations to myself. Maybe, however, reflecting on the Reformation in this anniversary year may help Christians to overcome our divisions and begin to answer Jesus' dying wish and prayer.

Talk Two: Grace

This year is the 500th anniversary of the European Reformation. On October 31, 1517 a monk in Germany by the name of Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the local church calling for an academic debate on them. At least, that is how the story came to be told. Whatever happened, what is clear is that Luther's challenge to the system of indulgences went 'viral'. Luther challenged the idea that the Pope had the authority or ability to release people from 'purgatory'. This meant, he said, that buying these bits of paper to get friends and relatives released early was a complete waste of time and money. Ultimately, the Reformation wasn't about abstract theological ideas: it was about authority.

Nevertheless, behind the challenge to authority there were theological ideas and, in the coming years, Luther was to spell them out. These ideas, at least as far as Luther was concerned, were anything but abstract. They came from intense personal experience.

Luther had been destined to become a lawyer. This was what his father had planned for him. Then one day, on a journey, he was caught in a storm and feared for his life. He promised St Anne that if she were to save him, he would become a monk. He did live, and he honoured his promise.

Being a monk, however, did not make him happy. He took the whole business seriously – some including his confessor – thought too seriously. He wanted to please God, but never felt good enough or that he could do enough to please God. When he came across the phrase the 'righteousness of God', it only served to remind him of how unrighteous he was.

Then, while preparing lectures on St Paul's letter to the Romans, he came to see that the righteousness of God wasn't about condemning sinners, but offering them the opportunity to be forgiven for their sins freely without having to do anything except have faith and trust in Christ. In other words, he discovered the grace of God and came to the realization that while God might be angry with our sin, in Christ he loves us freely and undeservedly.

The discovery changed his life and was to change Europe and the world. It wasn't, though, simply Luther's discovery of grace, that is, God's undeserved love for us, that was to make the difference, but the conclusions he drew from it. There was, he concluded, no need then for pilgrimages, confessions, religious acts and devotions, good works, penances, and all the other things that were part of medieval religion and which he saw as being done to earn God's love and forgiveness.

It is a message that others were to take up. Whatever we may think of the conclusions Luther drew from it, the message of God's grace has itself brought freedom and liberation to many. It is celebrated in many of the hymns we love and sing. Take, for example, the great hymn by the former slave-trader, John Newton: 'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.'

Nowadays there is no argument over it. What may have once been a source of division between Catholics and Protestants is so no longer. If you were, for example, to put a Catholic, Lutheran, and an Anglican in a room together and get them to discuss the grace of God, there would be little disagreement between them when it came to the big picture. Yes, there are differences about how we respond to the grace of God and what role the human will has to play in our experience of God's grace, but the differences are present as much within the different Churches as they are between them.

I have to admit to having problems with the idea of celebrating something that has resulted in so much pain and which has been a cause of such division between Christians. I have, however, no problem with celebrating some of the ideas that came out of the Reformation, particularly those that we can celebrate together.

Many of us live broken and difficult lives. It seems that nothing we do can put us back together again and help us to overcome the difficulties we constantly experience. However, as Luther discovered, God doesn't expect us to do anything: he has already done it for us. What we are offered in Christ is the love of God. The Bible tells us that God doesn't just give us this love, he lavishes it on us. Discovering it has the potential to change all our lives.

Talk Three: Justification by Faith, Judgement by Works

For the past few weeks at this time, I have been thinking about the European Reformation, the 500th anniversary of which is this year. I discussed last week how some issues that divided the Church 500 years ago are ones that we have now come much closer to one another over.

All Christians today believe we should celebrate the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we should all celebrate it, not as something to which we are entitled, but as something we receive as a gift from God. St Paul wrote that it is by 'grace that we are saved through faith'. This is known as the doctrine of justification by faith. In popular imagination, many wrongly think that this is a doctrine that Christians still disagree over. Some Christians continue falsely to be seen as thinking that we are justified by what we do rather than simply by faith in what God has done for us.

Whatever, however, was true 500 years ago, it is simply not true today. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses it in paragraph 1996:

'Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is *favor*, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.'

Indeed, I would argue that a radical version of justification by faith is the present message of all the Churches. What we preach is that Jesus is an inclusive, welcoming, forgiving, and accepting Saviour. It doesn't matter who you are, where you have come from, or what you

have done, Jesus loves, welcomes and accepts you – just as you are. In some versions of the message, we even drop the whole ‘Saviour forgiving sins’ bit. After all, Jesus is not the sort of person to condemn us for what we have done: who is to say what is right or wrong? Now I don’t want to spoil the party, and I like the idea that I don’t have to worry about what I have done as much as anyone. And clearly, as Luther discovered, the New Testament does tell us that God forgives us our sins and that it is all about his grace made available to us freely through faith.

Luther discovered the doctrine of justification by faith while studying St Paul’s letter to the Romans. The problem, however, is that while Romans undoubtedly teaches justification by faith, it also teaches judgment by works. In Romans, God is a God who gets angry with sin and while he forgives those who turn to him by faith in Christ, he punishes those who do not. And on the day of judgement he suggests it will be our works, not our faith, that God will judge. He writes, for example, ‘For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life ...’ (Romans 2: 6-10)

It is perhaps not surprising then that these verses and others like them in Romans cause huge problems for those seeking to write commentaries on the letter. We know that human works do not count. The trouble is that there are many passages both in Romans and in the New Testament where it seems that they do.

This is a message we prefer nowadays to ignore or to see as a minor part of the New Testament. However, the idea that we will all be judged according to our works, by how we have lived our lives is central, not peripheral, to our Lord’s teaching while he was on earth.

The Reformation message of justification by faith challenged the Church in its day. But the Gospel challenges us in new ways in each generation and we commemorate the Reformation best by listening anew to what the Gospel has to say to us. Perhaps we need to hear the message of judgement by works in the way that the Church 500 years ago needed to hear the message of justification by faith! The truth, of course, is that we need to hold together justification by faith and judgement by works. It’s easy to see why we prefer one to the other, but that doesn’t make it right.

One very popular TV programme is the BBC programme, Dr Who. One of the sayings of the Doctor is: ‘We are all stories in the end. Just make it a good one’. It’s not how Jesus puts it, but I don’t think he would disagree with it. All good stories have ups and downs, high and low points, happy and sad moments. The doctrine of justification by faith reassures us when we mess up, make mistakes, and get it wrong that it is not about us, but about the Lord we have faith and trust in. It reassures us we won’t be judged on the individual chapters and that the story isn’t over until it is over. This is why one of my favourite prayers is one that comes from the Anglican funeral service:

Grant us, Lord, the wisdom and the grace
to use aright the time that is left to us here on earth.
Lead us to repent of our sins, the evil we have done
and the good we have not done;
and strengthen us to follow the steps of your Son,
in the way that leads to the fullness of eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Talk Four: Unity

My own church is on Waterloo Road in Kowloon Tong. If you walk down Waterloo Road, you will see church after church all belonging to different denominations and mostly not talking to each other in any meaningful way. For the past few weeks at this time, I have been talking about the Reformation, the 500th anniversary of which is this year. What began as a movement calling for the reform of the Church ended up dividing it. Some regretted this, but saw it as necessary; many had no regrets and even seemed to relish it. One of the arguments used to justify division, and one which you still hear people using today, is that truth must always come before unity.

The Church at Corinth had been founded by St Paul. Many had been converted and the Church was lively and successful. It attracted some of the celebrities of the early Church people like Apollos and the Apostle Peter and others not so familiar to us today.

The Corinthians seem to have been very pleased with themselves and started discussing which of the various Christian leaders they preferred. Some argued for St Paul, others for Peter, others for Apollos and they were beginning to form into groups depending which they preferred. St Paul was horrified not because some preferred other leaders to himself, but that they were prepared to divide the church. 'Is Christ divided?' he asked. 'Did St Paul die for you?' He goes on to tell them that they are the Church, the body of Christ. They're God's temple. And, says St Paul, 'anyone who destroys God's temple, God will destroy' (1 Corinthians 3:17).

So what would St Paul have said about the Reformation? Some argue that St Paul himself was prepared to cause division for the sake of the truth. They point to Galatians and how St Paul reacted to people he believed to be preaching a false Gospel. He even openly and publicly challenged St Peter when he believed Peter to be in the wrong.

Of course, they argue, St Paul would have supported Luther, and others like him, who stood as he did for the truth of the Gospel. Personally, I am not so sure, or rather I think he would have agreed with many of the things the reformers said, but whether he would have been prepared to welcome the division of the Church I am not so sure.

The reality is we just do not know. What we do know is that St Paul thought the Church should be united and do what it could to avoid disunity. So, when writing to Rome and knowing that there were different groups within the Church each taking a different position on a variety of issues, he tells them to accept one another and to live with the differences. Unity, in other words, does not mean uniformity. We can have diversity without disunity and division.

The reality is that many of our divisions are not over key doctrines of the Christian faith, but over matters which are of little real consequence. This is especially true within individual Churches. Frankly, I hold out very little hope of the Church reuniting. So when it comes to the different denominations my own approach is to be 'denomination lite'. I do not think that the Anglican Church is the one true Church. I do think that there are many good even outstanding Christians within other Churches.

So being 'denomination lite' means rather than working to keep my denomination apart from other denominations, I try where and when I can to work with Christians of other Churches

without letting denominational backgrounds get in the way. Furthermore, while we may not be in a position to bring about denominational unity, we certainly are in a position to affect unity within our own individual Churches. And this is something all Christians are called to work for.

As I have said, Christians sometimes say that the truth of the Gospel must come before unity. But unity is not a consequence of the Gospel message, it is at the centre of the Gospel's message. St Paul writes that God has made known his will for the fullness of time which is to 'unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1:10).

Unity in the first place is between each one of us and God, but, as the New Testament makes clear, our union with God in Christ should result in peace and unity between God's people. The best way to commemorate and even celebrate the Reformation this year is for Christians to commit themselves to the Gospel message of unity in Christ and then sharing it with a divided world.

Talk Five: Authority

The popular image of Martin Luther is that of a monk singlehandedly taking on the might of an authoritarian and, in Protestant mythology, totally corrupt medieval Church. Two famous stories play into this narrative. The first is of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses, protesting at the sale of indulgences, to the Church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. The second is of an event in April 1521. Luther had been invited to appear before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms ('diet' meaning a formal meeting; Worms being a city south of Frankfurt). Luther was asked to recant his views. His response was:

'Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason - for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves - I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand I can do no other. God help me. Amen.'

The phrase, 'Here I stand I can do no other' is often taken to symbolize Luther's brave and defiant position against overwhelming odds, in the way that his nailing of the 95 theses symbolizes the inauguration of the Reformation. Ironically, Luther probably did not nail his theses to the church door and he also probably did not say, 'Here I stand I can do no other.' Nevertheless, these two apocryphal stories express what many want to be true: the Protestant Reformation succeeding because one brave man dared to put the authority of the Word of God and his conscience before the authority of the Pope and tradition.

However, things are not quite so simple. Luther was not alone: others in the Church were also calling for reform, and Luther's theological position was articulated against a background of social and intellectual change in Europe with the so-called discovery of the new world, scientific advances, and technological innovation such as the invention of the printing press. This particular invention was going to have as big an impact on society in the sixteenth century as computers have had in our own.

It is, however, certainly true that Luther was to give shape and direction to the Reformation and that without him it would have undoubtedly been very different. Whether this was a

good or bad thing, I will let others judge, but perhaps one of the most significant consequences of Luther's protest was the way it changed how authority came to be viewed.

No more was the Bible to be interpreted by the Church, now every man and (eventually woman) was to be their own Pope, interpreting the Bible for themselves according to their own conscience. It took some time for the consequences fully to work themselves out and, paradoxically, Luther himself did not approve of anyone who didn't interpret the Bible the way he did, which resulted in serious division amongst the protesters.

It wasn't though to take so long before interpreting the Bible according to one's own conscience turned into rejecting the Bible according to one's own conscience. The triumph of the Reformation ironically has been the triumph of the individual. This is why Luther has been a hero to many who do not in any way share his faith. This is not for one moment to reject the many achievements and insights of the Reformation. It is, though, to ask as we commemorate its 500th anniversary whether we need a new Reformation in the Churches that will undo some of the unforeseen and unintended consequences of the first.

We are where we are. The problems facing the Church and world are not what they were 500 years ago. The godless secularism and arrogant individualism of much of the developed world for which all Churches must take their share of the blame has resulted in a darkness every bit as real as that as was thought to exist at the time of Reformation. Despair, emptiness, loneliness, and hopelessness affect so many in our society so much so that even our young people are turning to suicide as the only way out.

What people need, quite simply, is God, and the Church needs to move together beyond the divisions of the past and humbly, but, confidently, announce the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Last year on the occasion of the 499th anniversary of the Reformation, Pope Francis spoke the following words in the Lutheran Cathedral in Lund, Sweden:

‘As Lutherans and Catholics, we pray together in this Cathedral, conscious that without God we can do nothing. We ask his help, so that we can be living members, abiding in him, ever in need of his grace, so that together we may bring his word to the world, which so greatly needs his tender love and mercy.’

2. August, 2017 – The Holy Trinity

Talk One: The Season of Trinity

‘We have done with dogma and divinity,
Easter and Whitsun past,
the long, long Sundays after Trinity
are with us at last;
the passionless Sundays after Trinity,
neither feast-day nor fast.’

As the poem by John Meade Falkner reminds us, in the Church’s calendar we are now in the middle of the longest season of the Church’s year; what used to be known as the Season of Trinity. This season of the year began a few weeks ago on Trinity Sunday. This is the Sunday in the Christian year most dreaded by preachers. As one preacher, not known normally for being lacking in words, said to me as he prepared to preach, ‘What do you say?’

It has been said that if you speak for more than five minutes on the subject of the Holy Trinity, you end up saying something heretical. As a result, many preachers shy away from talking about the Holy Trinity at all. While this is understandable, if those who are given the responsibility of preaching do this, what hope is there for congregations? So, conscious of the dangers, for the next few weeks at this time, I want to talk about the Holy Trinity.

First, though, a word about the Christian year and the Church’s calendar. It is, at first sight, a bit strange. Everything seems to happen in the first six months: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. All these seasons and festivals centre on Christ and what God has done in and through him. This makes the Festival of the Holy Trinity the odd-one out. It focuses, or so it seems, not on an event, but on a doctrine.

It is perhaps no surprise then that the Festival has had something of a chequered history. It was only officially adopted as a Festival of the Church relatively late in the 14th century, although it was celebrated by churches locally before this. It was often celebrated on the Sunday before Advent, the Sunday Christians now know as the Feast of Christ the King.

The Church of England, the Church where I was ordained, when it adopted its prayer book in the 16th century, numbered the Sundays in the second half of the Church’s year ‘Sundays after Trinity’. This was because it had previously been the practice to do so in the Liturgy used in a part of England before the English Reformation. (This Liturgy is known as the Sarum Rite.) In the 1970s and 1980s, the Church of England undertook a major revision of its Prayer Book and Liturgy, and the ‘Sundays after Trinity’ were dropped in favour of ‘Sundays after Pentecost’.

In the latest revision of its services, known as Common Worship, Sundays after Trinity have returned in the Church of England, although other Churches, including Anglican, continue to refer to Sundays at this time of year as the Sundays of Pentecost or simply, Sundays in Ordinary Time. At my own Church, Christ Church, however, we keep the old traditional ‘Sundays after Trinity’, even though most Churches, both globally and locally in Hong Kong, do not.

So, the question I want to ask in these talks is this: is the dropping of Trinity as a season in the Church's calendar of symbolic significance? To put it in another, more direct way: do Christians still believe in the Holy Trinity? The doctrine has certainly come under criticism both inside the Church and out. It has been faulted as trying to reduce the mystery of God to a formula or as being too dependent on Greek philosophy, making it impossible for people today to understand.

Not only is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity hard to understand, people are also either not sure whether they believe in it anymore, or they are sure and don't believe in it! Those who do still believe in it, either go easy on it or do not see it as central to their faith. It may be an interesting theological formulation, but it is not something seen as fundamental to the Christian life.

In all the Churches, however, those who are baptized are baptized in the name of the 'Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. This is because Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, told his disciples that this is what they should do (Matthew 28:19). The doctrine of the Holy Trinity isn't an optional extra, but at the heart of the Church's faith and worship.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity may be hard for us to understand, but, as beings who are human, what would we expect in contemplating the divine?

Talk Two: The Holy Trinity

It is frequently argued that the Church took the simple teachings of Jesus and changed them into something else far more complicated. Instead of the teacher from Galilee who taught people how to love one another and welcomed all regardless of who they were and where they had come from, the Church instead turned Jesus into some divine like figure far removed from the person who lived 2,000 years ago.

One of the people credited with starting this process of changing Jesus the prophet from Nazareth into the Divine Saviour from Heaven is St Paul, who is many people's hate figure; people both inside the Church and out. Of course, in reality, the worship of Jesus as divine began very early in the Church - way before St Paul even became a member of it. Indeed, while he was still its biggest opponent!

The reason that the Church from the very beginning worshipped Jesus as divine wasn't because it misunderstood the message of Jesus or because the Christians wanted to create a religion to rival other religions of their day, but because of their experience of Jesus himself both before and after his death. We need to remember that many of the first Christians had known Jesus personally. They had followed him and had been taught by him. While it took them some time to grasp what he was saying, it became very clear to them that what he was claiming for himself was something very profound.

After his death, an event they were not prepared for and were devastated by, they believed that this same Jesus had risen from the dead and was now exalted to be with God in a position of power and authority. This wasn't just some theoretical belief, they claimed to experience the exalted Jesus in their daily lives, guiding them and helping them. In their experience of Jesus, they felt themselves to be experiencing God himself.

In the writings these first Christians left the Church, they described their relationship with God as being with God the Father through his Son Jesus by means of the Holy Spirit. This 'Trinitarian' language permeates the New Testament. It is not just in the writings of St Paul, but in the Gospels and the writings of the other apostles as well. It is how St Matthew closes his account of the life of Jesus and how St John closes what became the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

After the New Testament writers had died, it was left to the Christians who came after them to attempt to explain what this all meant and what the relationship was between the 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. This was no easy task. As good Jews, the first Christians were resolutely monotheists who believed in the Oneness of God. But Jesus himself, while speaking of God as One, had also spoken of himself in divine terms and to complicate matters had promised to send his followers 'Another One' to lead and guide them when he had gone.

His followers tried hard for the next few hundred years to come up with some explanation that would enable them to worship and serve the God they believed in and experienced. They knew that they must hold to the Oneness of God. They also couldn't deny the divinity of Jesus the Son and that of the Holy Spirit. After many attempts, they arrived at the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which is expressed in the Creeds still used in the Church's liturgy today.

It is important to see that the Church didn't arrive at its faith in the Holy Trinity because it wanted to engage in some theoretical philosophical exercise. Nor was it out of a desire to make Christianity relevant to the society of the time. Belief in the Holy Trinity came directly out of the simple teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and of his followers relationship with him.

The Church didn't think it was inventing anything new or reducing belief in God to a formula, but simply reflecting on what God himself had revealed to them in the person and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. After much thought, prayer, and discussion, they concluded that God had revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that the only appropriate response was not argument and debate, but worship. It still is.

Talk Three: The Abandonment of the Trinity

While belief in the Holy Trinity has been at the heart of the Christian faith from the time of Jesus himself, many Christians today are abandoning faith in the Holy Trinity. Some are doing this knowingly and deliberately; others by default. The reasons for this are many, but one important reason for the abandonment of the Holy Trinity as the central doctrine of the Christian faith is that it goes against the grain of where Christianity is in the present. I realize that this is a big subject and that much more needs to be said than can be said in this broadcast. I would, however, single out three characteristics of present day Christianity.

1. *It has an aversion to difficult ideas.* The first characteristic is best expressed negatively by what Christians in general do not want! Life is both complex and challenging. Most of us feel under a great deal of pressure as we seek to make a living and raise our families. There is much in the world around us that clamours for our time and attention. When people come to Church, the last thing they want are more complications.

Preachers, then, are under tremendous pressure to keep it simple: to present the Christian faith in an engaging and even entertaining way. Social media has only served to reinforce

this demand. But whatever the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is, it is not easy. It certainly doesn't lend itself to heart-warming quotes on Facebook.

People don't like what they see as complex theories at the best of times. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity to most people seems both difficult and complex. A difficult doctrine is not going to appeal to most contemporary church-goers!

2. *It wants a faith that is seen as relevant.* The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is first and foremost about God. Yes, it does have much to say about the Church and about us as individuals, but first and foremost, it is about God and who He is in and of himself. The focus of the Holy Trinity is on God. But we are the 'me' generation. You may have seen the posters with the words: 'It is all about me'. I saw a fantastic birthday card the other day. On the top, it had the words: 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Today is all about you.' Then at the bottom it had: 'No change there then!'

We are not too concerned with who God is in and of himself. If we are concerned with God at all – and it's a big 'if' – it is about the relevance of God to me.

3. *It seeks a Christ who is human.* The Holy Trinity focuses on the relationship between Christ and the Father and the Spirit. It asks questions about our Lord's divinity and seeks to give an answer. Our concern now though is with his humanity and how that affects his relationship with us.

This is, in part, a reaction against too great a stress on our Lord's divinity in the past. The Church very early on came to the conclusion that our Lord was not only human, but also divine. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was, amongst other things, an attempt to work out in what way he was divine. Over the years, however, the emphasis often fell on his divinity rather than his humanity. In Christian art, for example, he was often pictured with a gold halo just in case you forgot and to avoid any misunderstanding.

However, to say that there has been a reaction against this is something of an understatement. People don't want someone who is, as St John's Gospel puts it, 'one with the Father'. We want someone who is 'one with us'. Not someone distant and mysterious, but someone close and relevant.

This desire for simplicity, relevance, and a Christ who is one of us is reflected in contemporary worship and in popular hymns. Whereas worshippers in the past used to sing:

'Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes ...'

Worshippers are now more likely to prefer hymns and songs that stress how near God is and how he can be known and seen. Hymns such as 'Shine, Jesus, shine ...', for example!

Historically, Christians have believed that Christ is both human and divine. Being human means he can identify with us in our struggles, difficulties, and pain, but being divine means he can do something about them. If I am in a hole, I don't only want someone who understands my predicament, but someone who can help get me out of it. In the New Testament, this is what the 'God who becomes man' does. It is why the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is so important and so full of hope.

Talk Four: The Reinterpretation of Christianity

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, like the season of Trinity, is in danger of being abandoned or, at the very least, made something of an optional extra. This, I would suggest, is a bad enough mistake in and of itself. However, the Holy Trinity having been removed as an obstacle, we are - perhaps without even realizing it – witnessing a reinterpretation of Christianity itself. Christianity is being changed from a Trinitarian faith into a humanitarian philosophy.

This is to be seen in the way the other Festivals of the Church's year are being subtly reinterpreted. Taking the three characteristics of Christianity I briefly outlined last time, these give the criteria with which we now approach our faith and any aspect of it:

1. It must be simple and easy to understand
2. It must be relevant to us
3. It must focus on humanity and not divinity

So, for example, Advent is about us getting ready for Christmas; Christmas is about the reaffirmation of the essential goodness of humanity; Easter is about what can be achieved by human self-giving; Ascension about humanity being affirmed and raised up; Pentecost about celebrating life. You don't even need God to celebrate the Festivals, though most people, in the Church at least, generally think it is perhaps a good idea to include him in the festivities.

Yes, I am parodying, but with this sort of emphasis on celebrating our humanity, there is little room at the party for the Holy Trinity. Christianity has now become a very acceptable religion for today even if it is not quite clear where God fits in. Christians need, however, to take a step back and see what has happened and, even more seriously, where it is all going:

First, we abandoned the Holy Trinity. Secondly, we reinterpreted the central features of Christianity. And now, a third stage in the reinvention of Christianity is underway. Having reinterpreted Christianity as a religion focusing just on humanity and human need, the way has now been opened for Christianity to take its place as one religion or philosophy amongst many. For some, it's the best example, for others, even some in the Church, it is not even that.

Religion, in general, expresses humanity's search for meaning and guidance as to how to live. Christians centre on Christ as our teacher and God's messenger, but now that Christianity is primarily focused on humanity, our faith in Christ does not mean that we shouldn't also acknowledge other teachers and messengers irrespective of whether they are Christians or not.

Christianity has become a philosophy focusing on life here and now in this world. Our concerns are not with finding forgiveness for our sins and life in the world to come. After all, if there is a God, then he will surely be the sort of God who will forgive everyone anyway and make everything alright in the end. No our concerns are far more immediate and have to do with our daily lives and what makes us feel happy and fulfilled. Morality, that is judgements about what is right and wrong, are to do with our attitudes to others and to the planet on which we live.

The Commandments of the Bible have been replaced with contemporary demands for acceptance, tolerance, and inclusivity. Everyone is welcome to the party as long as you welcome everyone else and don't hurt anyone who is there. It all sounds wonderful: 'No hell below us. Above us, only sky'.

It used to be said that people had created God in their own image. Whatever the truth of this in the past, it is dangerously true in the present. In the past, people made for themselves the sort of gods they found attractive. They were fashioned out of precious materials and made into images that people found appealing. We may not worship graven images, but make no mistake our present day gods are every bit images of our own creation. And like the images of the past every bit as useless.

Historic, orthodox Christianity realized that we have no strength of ourselves to help ourselves and that if we were to find meaning in the present and life in the future, we needed God to reveal himself to us. Our own attempts at religion were futile and useless. The message of orthodox Christianity is that this is precisely what God has done. And the God who reveals himself has revealed himself as 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. In other words, as the Father who we come to through his Son by the power given to us by his Spirit.

And it is in coming to him that we find hope.

Talk Five: The Purpose of the Church

In my previous talks at this time, I have been talking about the Holy Trinity, the belief that is expressed in the historic creeds of the Church and which, for many centuries, have been at the heart of the Church's worship regardless of what branch of the Church people happened to be a part. I have argued that this belief is at present in danger of either being abandoned altogether or, at least, quietly side-lined as not relevant to today. I have suggested that not only is this a terrible mistake, but that the Holy Trinity alone can offer us hope and salvation.

What is the purpose the Church? (And, I ask myself, what is my purpose as a clergyman?) It is not, I would suggest, or should not be, to manage, to fund-raise, or to maintain. It is not even to pastor and to counsel. It is, keeping it simple, to make God known and to lead his worship. But to do that people need to know who God is: who it is that they are worshipping and serving. The Church, historically, despite all its many failures and failings – and let's be honest there have been many – has believed that the God it worships has revealed himself in the life and person of Christ. The Church in its festivals celebrates what he has done for us and reflects on its meaning and significance for us.

In the season of Trinity, which we are now in, the Church celebrates what we have discovered in all this about who God is; who it is who has done all this for us.

The Holy Trinity tells us that God is one God in three persons; three persons in one God. It is a simple enough formulation, but one with huge implications. It is one that tells us that the baby whose birth was celebrated at Christmas was the one who brought creation itself to birth; that the one who died on the Cross at Easter was himself the Lord of life; that the one the Church proclaims isn't just a prophet and teacher, one messenger amongst others, but the eternally-begotten, divine Son of God in whom, uniquely, we see God himself: the God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And this God is worthy of our worship solely for who He is. Not because of what he has done for us in the past, not because of his usefulness to us in the present, but simply because he is God and beside him there is no other. This is Christianity as the Church has traditionally understood it.

The Catechism of the Roman Catholic in paragraph 234 says this:

‘The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the "hierarchy of the truths of faith". The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men "and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin".’

St Elizabeth of the Trinity, so-called because of her outstanding faith in the Holy Trinity, prayed this prayer:

‘O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me to become utterly forgetful of myself so that I may establish myself in you, as changeless and calm as though my soul were already in eternity. Let nothing disturb my peace nor draw me forth from you, O my unchanging God, but at every moment may I penetrate more deeply into the depths of your mystery. Give peace to my soul; make it your heaven, your cherished dwelling-place and the place of your repose. Let me never leave you there alone, but keep me there, wholly attentive, wholly alert in my faith, wholly adoring and fully given up to your creative action.’

The Anglican Bishop and hymn-writer, Bishop Ken, wrote what has become known as the Doxology:

‘Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
praise him, all creatures here below,
praise him above, ye heavenly host,
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.’

May we all discover for ourselves the God who created each one of us. The God who calls us to worship and serve him.

The God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

3. November, 2017 – The Call to be Faithful

Talk One: Rebellion in the Vineyard

There is, in the Gospels, a parable of Jesus that is not so well-known as some that he told. It is often referred to as the 'Parable of the Wicked Tenants', but I prefer the title, 'Rebellion in the Vineyard'. In the story, which is to be found in Matthew 21:33-46, a Landowner goes away leaving his Vineyard in the charge of tenants. The tenants want the Vineyard for themselves. So when the Landowner sends his servants to collect the produce due to him as rent. They beat one, kill another, and stone another. The Landowner tries again, sending more servants this time, but they are treated in the same way. This time the Landowner sends his son. If this was meant to intimidate the tenants, then it fails miserably. The tenants see this as their big chance finally to get the Vineyard for themselves, and they drag the son out of the Vineyard and kill him.

This story is told just after Jesus has entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and has cleansed the Temple in a controversial and violent manner. Jesus tells the story to the chief priests and elders, who naturally want to know who on earth Jesus thinks he is acting in such a way. What the chief priests and elders would have immediately understood is something that we don't get when we hear the story, that is, that the Vineyard was a common image for Israel herself. In the Old Testament, it is God who plants and owns the Vineyard. The chief priests and elders would also have been landowners themselves who owned vineyards of their own.

So, when at the end of the story Jesus asks them what the Vineyard Owner will do when he himself returns, their reply comes from the heart: 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.' Just so! Jesus then turns on them and says: 'Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.'

St Matthew writes: 'When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.' The irony, of course, is that they end up doing to Jesus what the tenants do to the Vineyard Owner's son in the parable.

There are two themes that I would like to explore in this story this month at this time. The first, the idea of producing the fruit of the Kingdom and, secondly, that of the Kingdom being taken away from those who do not and given to others who will. Before I do, however, I want to issue a word of caution.

In the past, Jesus' words have been taken to mean that the Kingdom would be taken away from the Jewish people and given to the Gentile Church. If that is not bad enough, this, in turn, has led to the worst kind of anti-Semitism in the Church. This week, we are remembering the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in Europe. This had its symbolic beginning when Martin Luther reputedly nailed his 95 theses to the Church door in Wittenberg in Germany. Whatever we think of Luther and the Reformation, Luther was guilty of some terrible anti-Semitism, fuelling such feelings in Germany, and we all know where that lead. This week needs also to be a time for the Church of repentance and apology. This perverted understanding of Jesus's words are not what Jesus meant, and St Paul takes three chapters in his most important letter, and what is regarded as the greatest ever piece of Christian writing, his letter to the Romans, explaining unambiguously that it is not what he meant.

But if this is not what he meant, what did he mean? We will explore this more in the weeks ahead at this time, but, at its simplest, Jesus was teaching that God expected what any vineyard owner would expect: grapes! The Reformation message was that God loves us, accepts us, and forgives us just as we are without us having to do anything to deserve his love or earn it. But it doesn't stop there. Having established a relationship with us in Christ, God expects us to produce the fruit that comes from the Spirit God gives to all who know him.

If a vineyard doesn't produce grapes, the owner knows at once that something is seriously wrong. If Christians don't show they are Christians by how they think and live, the same is true. One day, we will all have to give an account of ourselves. What we have believed will matter, but the big question God will ask is how our faith has been reflected in the way we have lived. It is a question worth pondering now before it's too late.

Talk Two: A Command to be Obeyed

Jesus' message in the Gospels that God expects those in a relationship with him to produce fruit, that is, to live a certain way, and that there will be serious consequences if they do not, is not a message that we particularly want to hear. This is not the Jesus we signed up to follow. We want the 'inclusive Jesus' whose message is one of welcome, who gathers his people together, and not the 'exclusive Jesus' who rejects people and casts them away. It has been the failure of the Church to hold these two sides of Jesus' message together that has been, and is still, the problem with much Christianity.

There have been times in the past when the Church has indeed stressed the need for people to produce fruit, to live the sort of lives that are honouring to God and the Gospel. This has been accompanied by warnings of the dire consequences of a failure to do so.

It has often, it must be said, led to a very unappealing 'judgemental type' of Christianity, one in which people felt looked down upon and rejected from the start. Churches failed to be warm and welcoming. Some terrible things were done in the name of Christ and often by otherwise good people acting from the best of intentions, thinking that they were pleasing God in the process.

This, thank God, has largely changed. The Church, in general at least, has taken on board the fact that Jesus was one who welcomed sinners and ate with them, and did so to such an extent that his behaviour was considered scandalous by the religious leaders. In his teaching, Jesus taught of the God who forgave sinners. He himself had come to seek and to save the lost. God, he explained, is the One who is like a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go in search of the one who has gone astray; who is like a woman sweeping a room to find a lost coin; or the Father who rejoices at the return of the Son who has wasted all his inheritance. What Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, when none were found who could condemn her, he says to all sinners who come to him, 'Neither do I condemn you ...' (John 8:11).

This is a message that Christians should proclaim and rejoice in. As Jesus said, 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (Luke 15:7). But in our enthusiasm for the inclusive message of Jesus, we have forgotten that the joy is over a sinner *who repents* and that what Jesus actually said to the woman caught in adultery was: 'Neither do I condemn you, *go and sin no more.*' We tend now to leave this part of the saying out of our thinking and application of Jesus'

teaching. It is, however, very much at the heart of it. We really must not lose the ‘neither do I condemn you’ of the Gospel, but we must also teach the ‘go and sin no more.’

I sometimes think that the reason people like me do not do so is that we don’t want to risk people saying, ‘Well, if that’s your attitude, forget it!’ And we have to face it, many will say just this, but while the Church’s obligation is to welcome people ‘just as they are’, it is also its obligation to preach the Gospel just as it is. Jesus’ last words to his disciples in Matthew’s Gospel are: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...’, but he didn’t stop there, he continued, ‘and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.’ Jesus’ teaching doesn’t come like the advice of a self-help manual or the wisdom of a Facebook video, but as a command to be obeyed.

Will people respond if this is the message of the Church? Will they still go to Church? Maybe, maybe not. But that really is the wrong question. The Church has fallen victim to the Facebook test of success, that of counting how many followers you have on your page or how many likes you get for a post. We sell Jesus like a PR firm sells its clients so that you have people who are immensely popular, but who are totally without talent; ‘famous for being famous’ as the phrase has it.

We are sometimes in danger of being afraid in the Church to say anything because we are frightened of scaring people away. But the Church’s solemn and sacred task is to be true to the message with which it has been entrusted. The question we must ask ourselves in the Church is: are we being faithful? And no, we won’t always be popular if we tell the truth. But people who tell the truth seldom are.

Sometimes, they even end up nailed to a Cross.

Talk Three: Fruits of the Kingdom

Jesus said to the chief priests and Pharisees that the Kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to those who would produce the ‘fruits of the Kingdom’. We have been seeing, on this day at this time, for the past couple of weeks how Jesus commanded his followers to demonstrate in their lives, by how they think and live, that they are his followers; to produce fruit, as Jesus puts it. This is a command addressed to each individual follower. It is also, however, also addressed to his followers as a group, that is collectively, to the Church.

The Church, in the New Testament, is not a business, a social club, a political organization, or even a welfare agency, but the body and bride of Christ. The Church has been entrusted by Christ with the task of ‘making disciples of all nations’ and ‘teaching them to obey’ all that he commanded. The Church is mandated by God to proclaim Christ faithfully and to make him known. It is to be his body here on earth, welcoming all who want to come to know God through him. To enable her to fulfil this task, God has given Christ’s followers, both collectively and individually, the gift of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives the Church the power and gifts she needs to fulfil her calling and to produce the fruit that God is looking for.

The obvious question, however, is: what does it mean for the Church collectively to be fruitful? Clearly there are many possible answers to do with worship, service, support, and

relationships. But fundamental to them all is faithfulness. In the last book of the Bible, the Risen Christ repeatedly urges the Churches of Asia to which John writes to be faithful 'even unto death'. Being faithful meant holding fast to their commitment to Christ, resisting false teaching, and not conforming to the surrounding culture or compromising their faith.

Many were to lose their lives and suffer terribly because of their refusal to deny Christ either in word or deed. Sometimes a simple denial that they were a Christian would have saved them and their families much horrific suffering, but they refused to compromise. Not only that, they were absolutely committed to truth. They believed Jesus' words that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth. At a series of Councils, they sought to define the essentials of that truth, and the Creeds were the result, forming the basis of 'orthodox faith', a faith that was to be the basis upon which the Church lived for many hundreds of years.

In the fourth century, as a result of the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. From this moment onwards, the Church shaped the development of the western world. In Europe, the Church was at the heart of European society and life, determining its worldview and culture. This does not mean it always got it right or that everyone was a Christian - that patently was not the case. Christianity was, however, the dominant force. We still hear its influence in some of the great music played on this wonderful radio station.

We have been commemorating this year the 500th anniversary of the European Reformation. One of the many consequences of the Reformation was that Christianity was exported to the New World and became a major force in the shaping of American consciousness and culture. This was in a different way to how it had shaped it in Europe, but no less significantly. Despite the fragmentation that came as a result of the Reformation, most of the churches, despite their many differences, shared a common worldview and held to the orthodox faith as expressed in the Creeds. The Creeds remained a shared inheritance and the common core of the message to which each in its own way sought to be faithful and, as a result of which, proved fruitful.

As we look back on the Reformation, all the Churches have much to repent of in terms of their failure to love one another and their failure to be as fruitful as they might have been had they been united in their service of the same Lord. There is, however, much to be thankful for in the past commitment of the various Churches to be faithful in seeking to be truthful to their common faith in Christ, expressed in the Creeds they shared and believed in.

This faith, despite the many mistakes and failings, created a rich culture expressed not only in the Church itself, but in society as whole. It inspired and made possible great literature, music, art, architecture, science, and human achievement. It permeated the very fibre of the world of which it was a part.

It was indeed fruitful.

Talk Four: A Lost Kingdom

The Reformation in Europe, the 500th anniversary of which we are commemorating this year, unleashed forces that were to have 'unintended consequences' of which we are only now seeing the full extent. The Church in the West, for example, is facing an existential challenge

and there is no way of knowing at this time what the outcome will be. Virginia Wolf famously said that ‘on or about December 1910 human character changed’. Just as October 31, 1517, as a date, is symbolic of a change that had been taking place in church and society for some time, and still had some way to go, so too with the date December, 1910.

In Europe, since the beginning of the 20th century, and more recently in America, society has been deliberately, systematically, and ruthlessly casting off its Christian heritage and rejecting a Christian worldview. The character of western society mostly certainly has changed in this time.

The Church’s reaction to this change has, I would suggest, been one of both shock and bereavement. Shock that having been so central and influential, it is so no longer. And bereavement at the loss of power, position, and importance. Rather than adjust and seek a new role, it has instead chased after the world as it has moved on in the hope of holding on to its traditional place within society as well as with the more noble motive of wanting to witness to Christ within it.

Consequently, during the 20th century, many in the Church attempted another Reformation, not this time to make the Church more acceptable to God, but instead to make it more relevant to the world, fearing its judgement more than God’s. The Church rewrote its liturgy and revamped its worship to make it more relevant; it revised its ethical teaching to make it more acceptable; and, faced with doubt, scepticism, and questioning of its faith, it revisited its beliefs, rewriting the very Creeds on which it had been founded, to make them more palatable.

The Church could not be blamed for society’s desire for a divorce. It can, however, be held accountable for its loss of nerve and failure to remain faithful. It is a fundamental principle of the Bible that if God’s people fail to produce the fruit of the Kingdom, then the Kingdom will be taken from them and given to those who will.

The history of many churches outside the West is bound up with western colonial expansion in the period after the Reformation. As the European powers expanded to colonies in Africa, India, and Asia, Christianity was exported with them and churches established.

This is the history of many of the major churches here in Hong Kong, not all, I know, but many, nevertheless. So, for example, we have the *Roman Catholic Church*; the Lutheran Church, which has its origin in Germany; the Anglican Church, whose very name means English; the Presbyterian Church, which traces its roots to various sources all of them ultimately European; and the international churches, where international is often a euphemism for western.

However, while the western Church has been suffering from an existential crisis, Churches outside the West have been steadily growing by remaining faithful to the very faith on which the founding churches were themselves originally built. Understandably, these Churches, predominantly in Africa and Asia, historically, have looked to the founding Churches in Great Britain, Europe, and America for guidance, inspiration, and leadership. But what happens now that these Churches in the West are in crisis, unsure of what they believe and how they should live in a society increasingly pagan and often aggressively opposed to the Christian faith?

The good news in all this is that God has not changed. Nor has the Gospel. Jesus Christ is still the same 'yesterday, today, and forever' (Hebrews 13:8). The anniversary of the Reformation is an opportunity for Christians in Churches which were divided because of it to set aside their differences, to rediscover their nerve, to reaffirm their commitment to Christ, and to 'contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3).

Christians are not called to be popular, successful, or influential. It really does not matter whether the world finds our worship understandable, our faith relevant, or our ethics acceptable. God alone is our Judge. The message of Christ to the Churches in the seven continents of our world today is the same as was his message to the seven Churches in Asia at the very beginning of Christianity:

'Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.' (Revelation 2:10)

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